



## FIVE-FOOT-TEN FROM KANSAS

BY JOHN FLEMING WILSON

Illustration by N. Marchand

**T**HE sultry table at which we sat was round-ringed with beer stains; the waiter was somnolent; Panama was drowsing in the afternoon of a hot April. Captain Mallow drummed idly with his fingers and surveyed with disgust the antics of two spider monkeys chained to the beam of the doorway.

"I hate these betwixt-and-between things," he remarked. "They aren't little enough to cuddle in your hand and they're not big enough to interest you."

"I fancy you like elephants," I responded. "You can't tuck them under your jacket; they don't sing, and they keep you busy wondering what they might do if they feel like doing something."

"I was referring to sensible people like you and me," Mallow responded slowly. "Gimme big women and big ships; big men and high seas; gimme a throat burned with thirst or lemme be drunk; I'd rather starve till I was chilled to the bone than have merely three meals. I'd rather lose my temper entirely than be only stirred up."

I had known Mallow for only a week, and he had strangely occupied my thoughts during that period. He was over six feet tall, square shouldered, lean hipped, taciturn, surly. He was also industrious and sober. So far as I knew he spoke to no one but myself. His steamer—a tramp—lay inside Naos Island, flying the British flag.

"Well," I answered, "I suppose all you big fellows like big things. It must be something for you to command respect in any crowd. I'm only five-foot-eight and I have to fight for my right of way."

He scanned me thoughtfully and shook his head. "I didn't mean it just that way. I'm thinking of a girl. She's five-foot-ten and came from Kansas. Last time I saw her she weighed one hundred and eighty-five pounds and —"

He fell silent and I stared into the soundless, dozing street. A *vigilante* curbed his mount before the doorway and whistled to the monkeys. They screamed back at him. He laughed mirthlessly and rode on.

"She never whistled," Mallow continued seriously. He lit a cigar. I believe I ordered beer. We did not drink it. I myself was too busy studying my companion. He evidently was on the point of making me a confidant; I saw his dark eyes cloud, as if some invisible wind of passion swept them. He spoke:

"She always said I had no imagination. I think that is true. It has bothered me at times. I have been informed that imagination is necessary to the

understanding of women. So I will just give you the facts."

"Why?" I demanded coldly.

"Possibly you may understand," he said gravely. He sank into reverie a while.

"You see she *was* very tall and big. She had been born and raised in this town in Kansas. I have never been there. She told me there were no young men up to her height. Says she to me, 'I couldn't get married there. I was too tall. The boys wouldn't even dance with me.' That was the fact of the case, as I understood it."

"Where did you meet her?" I asked.

"In Honolulu. I was then master of a schooner loading for Shanghai; my cargo was pretty well in and I went for a swim at Waikiki. I went to the reef and was coming in slowly. I was half way to the beach when I heard what I thought was a shark cleaving the water. I turned, and it was a big girl. She forged alongside and we talked. She was a good woman for the water, most as good as a native . . . she could beat me with that long easy stroke of hers. And now and again she would dive like a porpoise and I would see the shimmer of her shoulders underneath the blue of the water. Once I took her hand and we went down together till the white coral glistened just under us. A lot of little box fishes twinkled away and she looked at me and smiled. Then we came up and went ashore."

**"W**HO are you?" I asked her, as we dried out on the sand below the Japanese Inn.

"Mary Flaherty," she told me. "I'm a stenographer in the big hardware store on King Street."

"I looked at her and saw that she was a tremendous creature, yet trim as an albatross. The colors of the sky were in her eyes. We talked. She told me what I've told you."

"And no one will marry you because you are so tall?" I said at last.

"No one," says she in a whisper. Then I knew that she was in trouble. The world is full of women in trouble; they're mostly thin and about five foot tall and wear shoes with high heels. She wore sneakers. Her blonde hair fell over her face like rain. Maybe I was crazy. I have no imagination. What I said was, 'I'm six feet tall, and I want you.'

"That was plain enough, wasn't it? She paid no attention to my offer of marriage. She laughed and her lips were red. I don't yet understand what she meant. She asks me, 'Do you like mignonette?'"

"It's my favorite posy," I told her.

"When I was a kiddie I used to lie down and put my face into it in gran'ma's garden," she says.

"Sure," I answered. "I had a gran'ma myself. She wore grey gowns and stuck a bunch of mignonette in her belt."

"She pulled her bare feet up under her short skirt and thought a while. Then she looked at me oddly. 'You know I was in love once,' she told me softly. 'He was only five-feet-six. The other girls made fun of him when he took me to a dance. I think I'll never forget him.'"

"Something in this made me cross. I can't tell you why. I simply asked her the reason of her being in Honolulu."

"Oh, I went to business college instead of to sociables and dances," she informed me. "I worked home a while and then I came as far as here with a girl who was going as a missionary to China."

**"W**E SAT there quite a while, as the sun dropped, and presently I inquired whether she couldn't forget that little fellow in Kansas.

"I'm not sure," says she. "What did you mean when you said you wanted me?"

"For my wife," I told her. "I'm taller than you are and I feel lonesome. Still—I stopped right there. I meant what I said, but a man can't be too careful. The service reads *'Till death do us part.'* That means that either the husband or the wife must go first. And we hadn't gone through all the preliminaries . . . we hadn't met by lamplight . . . I don't know anything about Kansas. I looked at her a while and then I said, 'Yes, I'll marry you.' I meant it."

"Pretty soon she put her slender hand over to me. I tucked it into my own. The sun went down and the lights were lit on the hotel *lanais*."

Mallow looked owl-like in the sunlight that streamed in the doorway. The spider monkeys swung endlessly on their chains.

"For heaven's sake, man," I said irritably, "keep to your yarn."

He looked at me soberly. "I see you don't know what marriage means," he resumed. "It isn't exactly love; it's serious—*Till death do us part*. I'm not religious especially. But a promise is a promise—unless divorced. That's different. But ordinarily it has always struck me that it would be fairer if both went together."

I lost my temper at this preposterous statement.

"She never liked profanity," he said simply, this dull skipper. "So I never use it."

"I beg your pardon," I muttered.

"That's all right," he said, amiably enough. "Her rules apply only to me."

"Well?" I responded. (Continued on page 250)